



ALÈSSI DELL'UMBRIA 2018-09-12

## R.I.P. JACQUES MESRINE

DOCUMENTATION CRITICAL GANGSTER, POLICE, PUBLIC ENEMY NO.1, STATE

**A 2010 essay on the life, death and continuing appeal of the legendary French bank robber, kidnapper and escape artist, known as "Public Enemy No. 1" and "the man of a thousand faces", Jacques Mesrine, the author of *The Death Instinct*, assassinated by the French police in 1979, who, despite his notoriety, said, just before he was killed: "some people want to transform me into a hero, but there are no heroes in crime. There are only men who have been marginalized and do not accept the laws because they are made for the rich and the powerful."**

There is no doubt that Jacques Mesrine was gunned down without warning by the French police, or that the order for this summary execution came from the highest levels of the state.

It was 3:15 p.m. on November 2, 1979. Mesrine was behind the wheel of his BMW 528i, stopped behind a truck with a canvas-covered flatbed, waiting for the light to turn green. Trapped in his seat belt, when the tarp on the truck was raised, he did not even have time to react. The last thing he saw must have been something like a screen on which he could barely catch a glimpse of four assassins opening fire from the truck before suddenly stopping.

Of the thirty or so bullets shot from three Ruger carbines and an Uzi submachine gun, eighteen found their mark in situ in "Public Enemy No. 1". They used semi-armored explosive bullets, which cause irreparable wounds in the body by breaking apart on impact, bullets that have been officially prohibited for use in war since the Hague Convention of 1899, except for big-game hunting.... A cop who showed up on foot finished off the incident by shooting Mesrine in the temple with his pistol.

It all took place at the Porte de Clignancourt, in the XVIII Arrondissement of Paris, not far from Rue de Belliard, where Mesrine had been living.

Most of the cops who participated in this ambush later admitted that they had orders to kill Mesrine. Only the chief of police, Robert Broussard, who was in charge of the whole operation, obstinately continued to maintain the official version: "He was given a warning, but he tried to throw the grenades that he had on the floor of the car and the men fired on him; period." Nor is there the least doubt that the assassins from the anti-robbery brigade also tried to kill Mesrine's companion, Sylvia Jeanjacquot: as for

her, the impact of the bullets on the passenger's side of the windshield was indisputable evidence. Sylvia Jeanjacquot was an annoying witness and seven bullets in the head were certainly enough to render any further debate on this point idle. From the point of view of the police, if the operation was bungled in any respect, it was due to the fact that Mesrine's companion survived her injuries; in any case, she lost an eye and had to undergo various serious surgical procedures.

Mesrine had unequivocally announced that he would never be taken alive. He had fully assumed the risk of this violent death as opposed to the slow death in the cement coffin of a High Security Module (MAS). This does not in any way diminish the fact that he was the victim of a militarily organized ambush, even with respect to the choice of arms and ammunition. The way the operation was carried out says everything about the fear that the Great Jacques inspired in the cops: there were about fifty of them at the scene of the killing, recruited from among the most experienced members of the Central Office for the Repression of Organized Crime (OCRB) and the Search and Special Operations Brigade (BRI). In an attempt to justify the execution of November 2, the public prosecutor of the Republic declared to the media: "The fact that we were looking for Mesrine presupposed that we were in a legitimate state of permanent alert". But the ambush was even more revealing with regard to the problem that Mesrine's escape had caused for the state. "It has become a political issue", Robert Bouvier, the General Director of Police, declared a few days earlier to the police commanders responsible for the manhunt, admonishing them for their impotence against "Public Enemy No. 1".

The police operation of November 2, 1979 was a political crime. And the shameful exhibition of the corpse before the video cameras and the photographers—just as the corpse of Cartouche<sup>1</sup> was exhibited to the masses long ago—had the purpose of restoring the authority of the state in the eyes of the public, an authority that had been subjected to ridicule for eighteen months.<sup>2</sup>

Because of his resolute attitude of defiance of the state, because of the tone of insolent freedom that he adopted, Mesrine had irremediably situated himself beyond any notion of guilt, responsibility and punishment. The state reserves special methods for this kind of person. It is said that president Giscard d'Estaing, exasperated by Mesrine's impunity, ordered the execution himself; he was perfectly capable of doing so. His Minister of the Interior at the time, Christian Bonnet, made it clear in his speech to those in charge of the services responsible for hunting Mesrine, the Search and Special Operations Brigade and the Central Office for the Repression of Organized Crime: "Do not take any risks." This is just what a mafia kingpin would have ordered with regard to an important execution: with one anodyne sentence, only a little more insistent than usual.... In the figure of the outlaw, the abstract individual and the citizen disappear: nothing is left but a man who is to be struck down.

There is no shortage of well-intentioned people who disparage veneration for Mesrine and consider him to be a detestable individual. Some invoke one or another aspect of his youth in order to lend support to this postmortem condemnation of the "Public Enemy". Such an external and omniscient point of view will always be able to condemn most of those people who, one day or another, will rebel, on the basis of their past actions. This is what Hegel ironically called "the morality of the schoolmaster". For our part, we only consider the truth of an individual to reside in what he becomes.

In May-June 1968, Mesrine was in Canada, but when he became acquainted with life in the prisons of France, in 1973, revolt had penetrated the walls of the prisons. Many of the prisoners had some experience on the outside with the fever of 1968, and for them it was unthinkable that they should bow down before either judges or prison guards. The first riot broke out in the central prison of Toul in December 1971. Two months later, after the riot at the prison in Nancy, one prisoner responded to the stupid question of a journalist ("Why are you rebelling?"): "Because it's fashionable!" A good response, which sarcastically expresses the spirit of the times.

Mesrine's epic culminated in the decade of the seventies, when he began to attack the prison machine from within as well as from without. During the summer of 1974, half of all the prisons in France were convulsed by riots and ten of them were burned down. His offensive, which had commenced with the actions of thousands of prisoners, was individually waged by Mesrine during his incredible period as a fugitive, thereby winning the sympathies of the common folk between March 1978 and November 1979. The announcement of his execution was greeted by many people with a great deal of sadness.

Vincent Cassel, who played the role of Mesrine in the two-part film directed by Jean-Pierre Richet, made it a point to explain during all his television appearances that he had sought a revision of the initial screenplay: he did not want to transform Mesrine into a hero, he explained. His efforts were in vain: Jacques Mesrine himself had become a hero a long time before that. He became a hero while he was still alive, and this could not be changed by either Cassel or by all the money of the movie producers. On the day after Mesrine's execution, certain unknown persons wrote on the walls of the Porte de Clignancourt: "Here, Jacques Mesrine fell in battle." One year later, day after day, the streets of the neighborhood would be covered with false street signs: "Rue Jacques Mesrine, assassinated by the state on 11/2/79." Young people who had not even been born when Mesrine was still alive are still talking respectfully about him today, and all over France rock, punk, oil, rap and reggae bands are still rendering homage to his memory.

One can attempt to besmirch the reputation of a man like Mesrine, but this will never diminish the affection and the veneration that ordinary people feel for him. Nor is there any lack of reasons for this. In the final accounting, many people, compelled to waste their lives in order to earn a living, are sincerely convinced that robbing banks is an honorable way to get by. And the resentment of the common man is directed more against those who run the banks than those who rob them. "Some will rob with

a six-gun, and some with a fountain pen", as Woody Guthrie said in "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd", which he composed after the execution of that other "Public Enemy No. 1" in another country. This sentiment was felt by many poor people during the late 1930s, not to speak of the our time!

No individual chooses to become a hero; he becomes a hero despite his intentions. On the cassette tape he recorded shortly before his death, Mesrine declared: "Some people want to transform me into a hero, but there are no heroes in crime. There are only men who have been marginalized and do not accept the laws because they are made for the rich and the powerful." This is true, but these marginals are the heroes of the common man and it is the public recognition of this fact that settles the question once and for all. Mesrine therefore joins Cartouche and Dillinger, Lampião and Musolino. And as long as the common people continue to choose their heroes from among the outlaws, we will know that in this epoch this spirit still prevails.

In any event, Mesrine knew what he was doing. As the epic of his feats unfolded he never failed to gain in lucidity. "Certain types who committed crimes against humanity have been pardoned, and they even participate in certain governments. But they do not want to pardon a common criminal? A crime against humanity is pardonable, but not a crime against an office of the Société Générale or the BNP? A person is declared to be incurable when he attacks the system, when he attacks capital..." (interview in Libération, January 3-4, 1979).

Whereas "old-style" gangsters accepted the principle of punishment and resigned themselves to it by serving their sentences, accepting imprisonment as one of the hazards of their job that would serve to enhance their reputations, Mesrine never managed to internalize the prison. It is true that, when he was imprisoned in Canada for the kidnapping of the millionaire, Georges Deslauriers, he underwent terrible suffering. The Special Corrections Unit of the Saint-Vincent prison, where he was transferred in the summer of 1970, was directed by authentic psychopaths and was even worse than the MAS units of the French jails! Nonetheless, he escaped with the few means at his disposal on August 21, 1972. In order to help those he left behind to escape from that prison, twelve days later he returned with his fugitive comrade, Jean-Paul Mercier, to attack the penitentiary. This time they were well-armed, but had to retreat before the police forces after an intense firefight in which they exhausted their supply of ammunition.

Mesrine's life, after his escape from the Special Corrections Unit, became a series of challenges launched at the police, judicial and prison authorities. It could be said of him that he was arrogant, boastful, and haughty. Perhaps this is true, but he continued to defy the authorities. After his return to France, where he carried out even more robberies, he was arrested on March 8, 1973: he escaped three months later, as he had announced, on June 6, 1973. During his trial in May 1977, he announced that he would escape, which provoked laughter and shrugging of shoulders. A year later, he escaped from the prison "from which no one escapes". He was accused of having created a celebrity. But the celebrity in question paid for his fame with his life.

The escape from the Santé, on May 8, 1978, would have been magnificent had it not been for the death of Carman Rives, who followed Jacques Mesrine and François Besse at the last minute and was shot down by the police at the wall of the prison. This was above all a massive blow against the sinister Alain Peyrefitte, the Minister of Justice who would concoct the infamous "Security and Freedom" law, the first such law in France that would banalize the state of exception. To see this blockhead receive such a setback was no small satisfaction for all of us, who had applauded the magnificent aplomb of the fugitives and appreciated their achievement: no one had ever before escaped from the Santé prison.

An escape is above all a great cause for celebration among all the other prisoners, those who remained behind and who on that day witnessed a flash of light that illuminated the monotony of prison: the prison colony is not invincible (Jocelyn Deraiche, then incarcerated in Fleury-Mérogis, recounted that the prisoners organized an extraordinary disturbance to celebrate the good news; the same thing happened in most of the prisons in France).

For Mesrine, it was not enough to accomplish great feats: he also had to do things with real style. Rule No. 1: never show them that you are defeated. Thus, when the Mesrine-Schneider duo triumphantly arrived at the airport in Montreal after their extradition from the United States, on July 23, 1969, the two of them, in handcuffs, calmly embraced and smiled for the public; when the journalists asked him if he had anything to say, Mesrine responded humorously: "Yes. Long Live Free Quebec!"<sup>3</sup> Rule No. 2: anticipate being imprisoned. Undoubtedly educated by his Canadian experience, he planned his escape while he was still at large. He therefore managed to escape from the Compiègne courthouse in 1973, in accordance with a plan that he had made before he was arrested: all he needed to do was to recover a pistol that had been hidden in the men's room by his accomplice Michel Ardouin, who was waiting for him outside the courthouse in a car, seize a judge as a hostage, and shoot at the police, who were tempted like good soldiers to intervene. It was this escape that earned him the title of "Public Enemy No. 1" in France. Rule No. 3: the best defense is a good offense. After they arrested him, he wrote *The Death Instinct*, in which he engaged in a great deal of exaggeration by taking credit for a number of unverifiable and implausible murders: a true literary provocation, two months after he was sentenced. That a bank robber should dare to recount the story of his life without demonstrating even the least sign of remorse scandalized the France of Giscard d'Estaing. "A flight forward," some will say: we say instead that Mesrine always burned his bridges and always issued one challenge after another. He smiled throughout his entire trial in 1977, at the conclusion of which he was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

This attitude also had the advantage of assuring his credibility. Anyone who announces that "I will be out in three months" and escapes three months later will immediately thereafter have the necessary credit that will induce some average Joe to dare to

hide weapons in the MAS of Santé. Mesrine's personal charisma and his capacity for seduction were also due to the fact that he proved his worth through action.

When his face appeared on "Most Wanted" posters, the fugitive became famous. The more invisible he remained, the more famous he became. To do this, however, he had to conceal his face. Mesrine was an expert when it came to disguises and travelled everywhere without being identified. The man known as "the man with a thousand faces" had that talent of the actor that consists in getting under the skin of another person, but for a diametrically opposite purpose, since for him it was a matter of disappearing into the anonymity of the masses. In this clandestine lifestyle, the outlaw belongs completely to himself, unlike the actor who, under the spotlights, is content with representation.

If the celebrity of the actor leads him to awards and wealth, that of the outlaw leads him sooner or later to death, since he insinuates into the mechanism of celebrity something that is infinitely dangerous: the public recognition of a rebellion without concessions that is proclaimed as such. This recognition, which is the real victory of the outlaw, is also equivalent to his death sentence. During his last period as a fugitive, wherever you went you only had to listen in order to hear simple citizens praise Jacques Mesrine, up to the point that in December 1978 the weekly *Paris-Match* portrayed him as one of the most popular people of the year... The state ordered the execution of Jacques Mesrine in order to put an end to this recognition that nothing could now stop. The mechanisms of celebrity are not subverted with impunity.

On the other hand, those who were the hunters had to stage an elaborate scene in order to cover their tracks. Several hours before the execution, the cops literally constructed the stage set of the crime at the Porte de Clignancourt, and each one of them took up his position like an extra in a movie. The death sentence, however, which was completely real, was also the object of a retrospective re-arrangement of the scenery (the famous bag that contained two hand grenades was placed on the floor of the car after the killing) aimed at the media, who would retransmit it.

Gilles Millet, who interviewed Mesrine after his last escape, said of him: "Mesrine was good, both in the interviews as well as in the photo sessions." The photographer Alain Biros, who accompanied Millet on these occasions, said with respect to Mesrine: "I found myself facing a cliché, but he was not like that at all; Mesrine had something about him that made him seem like an ordinary guy." Obviously, anyone whose face appeared on posters at every police station in the country would be interested in giving the appearance of Mister average guy, but not everyone is capable of pulling it off. In 1979, Mesrine was still going out and mixing with the people, dining in restaurants and going dancing with his girlfriend, even when the police manhunt was at its peak. He even amused himself by asking policemen on the street for directions, which was a good way to test his disguise: the most daring of these tests was the visit he made together with François Besse to the Deauville police station, where they passed themselves off as inspectors; they were sizing up the police force just before their robbery of the casino, on May 26, 1978. Generally, those who knew him described him as a very sociable man, who enjoyed engaging in conversation with people on the street and in the cafés, and who liked to do favors for his neighbors; during his stay in London, when he was being sought as "Public Enemy No. 1", he invited his neighbors to dinner at his house!

All we know about Mesrine is derived from his public persona. In this connection it is not without interest to recall that, according to the testimony of certain Latin authors, the term persona originally designated, in the theater of ancient Rome, a mask that covered the entire head of the actor. The notion of celebrity thus emerged from a play in which the most visible part of one's individuality, the face that sets us apart from others, is concealed.

In the various forms of the theater of masks, the persona does not correspond to the identity of an individual person, but to a particular type of behavior, both with regard to gestures as well as to verbal expression. With the advent of classical theater and then of the cinema, which, to the contrary, valued individual uniqueness, the persona gave way to the role. The aspect of improvisation disappeared from the stage play, which now enclosed the actor in the representation of an individual to whom he loaned his own face. For the role obeys a written definition in which the gestures and words are fixed and they dissolve the zone of uncertainty opened up by the mask, by the persona (the original meaning of the word, role, derives from the word for a document written on a rolled piece of parchment, from the Latin *rotula*). The idea of the role involves the ability to engage in interpretation, in which individual psychology assumes the leading place, whereas what the persona involved was above all the ability to play. And even if one speaks of the "play of the actor", this is nothing compared to the play, which was truly creative and practically unlimited, of the persona in the theater of masks.

The modern actor, whose omnipresent face embodies the exaggerated and narcissistic individual of our epoch, only exists, paradoxically, through his roles. He is famous because he loans his face to others: to Jacques Mesrine, for example... The fugitive, however, still preserves something of the actor of the Noh Theater or of the Commedia dell'arte, which is manifested by concealing his face, that is, by obliterating the part of his individuality that externally defines his identity. In other words, what the actor experiences as discomfort and transforms his profession into the prey of psychoanalysts, a person like the outlaw experiences, on the contrary, as a game. While the actor never ceases to be hounded by the uncertainty of his ego, the outlaw reaffirms himself by playing with identities. Mesrine, not satisfied with the infinite transformation of his face, resorted to dozens of identities. Among the many fake identity cards that he used, he also used, during his last period as a fugitive, a fake police ID. And he gave himself the rank of police chief.

The fugitive, unlike the actors in the Commedia, does not only work in one mask throughout his entire life, but rather like the

actors of the Greek theater of the classical age, who could change masks several times during the course of one play. Unlike the latter, however, who changed personas when they changed their masks, when the fugitive modifies his appearance this does not prevent him from fully inhabiting his persona: this is an integral part of the play. The analogy with the theater of masks is due to the fact that it is not an individual that is recognized in public, but a celebrity: anyone can run into such an individual in the street without identifying him. And the reverse is true: the person who was closest to Mesrine during his last period as a fugitive, Sylvia Jeanjacquot, who therefore knew him best as a unique individual, had never heard of him before she met him! ("He made me read *The Death Instinct*. I didn't like it. I didn't like the character," she declared.)

Mesrine constructed his own personality, and they never forgave him for that. We need only recall the scandal that was triggered by the publication of *The Death Instinct* in 1977. To a great extent, Mesrine knew how to be unpredictable. But the persona escaped from him and he was imprisoned in a role, a horrible role: "With the press he allowed himself to be attributed with all kinds of exaggerations and lies that helped to confer upon him the image of a bloodthirsty beast, an image that he could not free himself of later," as Sylvia Jeanjacquot would subsequently write. Mesrine knew how to take his world by surprise, but he also surrendered at times to the easy way of putting on the role that that world expected from him.

The source of the energy that animates the play of such a person is defiance. At the same time that it drives him into a flight forward, this energy without concessions prevents him from keeping the proper distance and helps to isolate him. For when this power is that of a single individual it is terrible. In him, the will prevailed over calculation: it is obvious that Mesrine was not a reasonable person. Ardouin said of him that he was incapable of self-criticism. While it is true that he never doubted himself, and his successive escapes did not fail to reinforce his confidence, this did not prevent him from learning lessons from his failures.

The Mesrine of the sixties evolved in the criminal underworld; it was in this milieu where he came of age, under the guidance of the enigmatic Guido. In this milieu his ego was exacerbated permanently and he had to be able to impose his will at any moment, by way of intimidation or violence. The role is defined, and a misinterpretation can cost you your life. All of this takes place, however, among gangsters, and it is there that it has to stay. The Mesrine of the seventies, who laid claim to his robberies and denounced the prison machine, consummated the break with the underworld of crime. He became a celebrity, and this profoundly irritated the gangsters.

It would be hard to deny that Mesrine developed his own style, including his own way of presenting himself. In other words, he had an art, as they used to say in Italy, where this word simultaneously evoked technical ability and the way one did things. By saying this, we do not intend to insinuate a commonplace like "he made his own movie", etc. What he performed was his life, as an always-renewed interpretation; for example, after having robbed a bank, he would cross the street and rob another one, as he once did with Mercier<sup>4</sup> and did again in Paris. And the play of the celebrity formed part of this interpretation. Those who today still put him down only wanted a repentant defendant in the courtroom and a prisoner who would silently expiate his debt to society.

Mesrine was often blamed for his oversized ego but in reality what he was blamed for was having affirmed his individuality. Indeed, the impact that Mesrine's feats have had says everything about the crisis of individuality in a society that has banished every form of agon, of which nothing remains but the most ridiculous and banal forms. Such an epic places the ego in a dizzying position, something that almost no one will risk, but at the same time it also awakens the nostalgia for a consummated individuality. Who would wage this "war for recognition" today?

Since Mesrine's death there has been no shortage in France of great bank robbers who managed to pull off wonderful escapes. Ahmed Othmane, for example, who escaped from the prison of Baumettes, in Marseilles (another great feat), or more recently Antonio Ferrara or Pascal Payet. But none of these people played the game of the celebrity like Mesrine.

From this point of view, a comparison of the personality of Mesrine and Besse is instructive. The former was all exuberance and externalization, the latter was all reserve and internalization; the former enjoyed everything he did as if he was a gourmet, while the latter seemed to practice asceticism. It has been said of Besse that he was a kind of soldier-monk. It is not by accident that he ended up succumbing to a kind of mysticism during his last prison sentence, at the end of the nineties, and that he even went so far as to renounce his past life as an outlaw. To fall back upon individual internalization can be a form of defense against an external pressure as strong as the one that weighs upon the outlaw; this time, this retreat ended up leading Besse to a psychological dead end from which he was unable to escape except by means of a kind of self-abnegation, proclaimed in 2002 after his last trial.<sup>5</sup> Mesrine followed the opposite road, that of externalization, that of the public celebrity. He was not afraid of the escalation to which this would condemn him: he assumed it knowing full well what to expect and it was in this that his greatness resides. "He had the impression that he was following a path that was inevitably fatal", Sylvia Jeanjacquot later wrote concerning this last period of the life of her companion.

This road also implied never allowing an insult from journalists to go unpunished. Thus, in November 1975, when he was in Santé, Mesrine reacted violently to an indecent article by Jacques Derogy in *l'Express*, which called him a "paid murderer in the service of the pimps". You really have to be brave to insult a man who is imprisoned in a maximum security prison, right? And we may mention his rage, in September 1979, directed against the double agent Jacques Tillier, former cop and journalist working for Lucien Aimé-Blanc, leader of the BRI and specialist in dirty tricks. Tillier had written in the fascistoid weekly *Minute* that Mesrine did not keep his word with his friends. This man, who always had to honorably respect his commitments regardless of the cost

(the most beautiful proof of this was the expedition he led with Mercier against the USC) could not let this pass unrequited: "Those who dip their pens in shit should not be surprised if one day they end up eating a lot of it," he wrote to Minute after the corrective that he inflicted on Tillier...

There are, however, postmortem confrontations, and these take place on the big screen. We shall not even speak of the various lousy depictions that were quickly forgotten, but only of the thriller directed by Jean-François Richet. When he agreed to play the role of Mesrine, Vincent Cassel declared that he preferred to exploit the contradictions of his personality rather than create an idyllic portrait of Mesrine, an intention that somehow was lost along the way, since Richet's biopic, besides the fact that it took serious liberties with regard to the facts, was very careful to depict the personality of Mesrine within a historical perspective: during the four hours of the film, all you see is a screwed up gangster, who seems to be ready to explode at any minute and for whom the only thing that leads him to act is a kind of neurosis. In any event, it was not in the capability of an actor to recreate the dimension of the play inhabited by "Public Enemy No. 1". To do so, they would have had to have been prepared to subvert the norms of cinematographic production and its codes of language, which would have opened up the opportunity to make a really original film, which the epic of Mesrine fully deserved.

The fear of death never ceases to insinuate itself into life, and determines many of the renunciations that end up making men ill. Anyone who has crossed this line must have an insolent liberty, that of playing with his own life. The intensity that is thus experienced is an everyday victory over death as an insidious presence, for which, however, one pays a very high price: that of dying young.

An old story tells us that the slave is the person who, in the struggle for recognition, gives up and submits to his master out of fear of dying. The fact that this story was transmitted to us by the pen of a philosopher does not at all obviate the kernel of truth that it contains. The story preserves its relevance beyond the circumstance where the master imposes his will in the form of the medieval lord or the modern state, or whether the slave is depicted in the form of the serf or the citizen.<sup>6</sup> This might be the most closely-guarded secret of all of human history, one that is so important that no myth or legend has ever dared to reveal it.

Those who have allowed themselves to be disarmed will no longer risk their lives; they will be dominated by a fear that is all the more abject for being subliminal: the fear of dying, concerning which Hegel said that it was "the absolute master". Outlaws, those who have become heroes among the anonymous plebs, relate a history in reverse, the other side of history: the slave is always a man who has been disarmed. The celebrity of the outlaw fascinates precisely because he reminds us of this repressed truth: without a warlike ethic there is no freedom.<sup>7</sup>

It is not natural to die young. But to die because one has defied those who possess the legal monopoly of violence is an exceptional destiny. Mesrine allowed himself the luxury of tranquilly looking death right in the face. On the cassette tape that he recorded for his girlfriend shortly before he died he told her without the least ambiguity: "If you are listening to this tape, it means that I am shut into a cell from which there is no escape..." It is especially important that one does not perceive this ability to play with life as any kind of predisposition to sacrifice or a tendency to suicide. Mesrine loved life passionately. Otherwise, where did he get the energy to escape four times? Mesrine, as he would later write in the first pages of *The Death Instinct*, only rejected, since his return from Algeria, the constrained and clock-watching life to which he was destined.

Mesrine chose to die with arms in hand. In that same era, hundreds of young people died with a syringe in their hands. Others often exited this life due to an accidental overdose or a contaminated needle. The epic of Mesrine offers, to the contrary, the proof that life can only be experienced in action, setting one's own persona into play in a generous and risky way. "It does not seem more idiotic to me to die from a bullet to the head than at the wheel of an R16 or in Usinor working for minimum wage," he declared (interview in *Libération*, January 3-4, 1979). Jacques Mesrine was a real fighter.

He was also a real big spender. Mesrine burned money. Besides the fact that he liked to roll in the dough, he played poker and the games at the casinos, and he lost. But what the bank robber played with at the casinos was his life. Some bank robbers save up their money, accumulate a bankroll a little at a time by way of their heists and holdups and then one day they peacefully retire. Those who burn money, on the other hand, enjoy in the form of this special kind of vertigo the fact that they cannot experience life in any other way than always pushing it to the limit. Yes, living at the limits. To lose in one night what one had won in a few minutes. Absurd but emotionally stirring. The intoxication of the game is nothing but one aspect of the intoxication that seizes the bank robber when he grabs, in a few seconds, a few packets of cash. As soon as he wins it, he burns it; the bank robber only knows money as excess. It is such an intense experience that one accepts the risk that one might lose one's life while engaging in it.

Mesrine did not take drugs, however. In any event, drugs were not part of the customs of his generation. He did not live to see the advent of those bank robbers who were stuffed full of cocaine and who monopolized the headlines after the middle of the eighties. And he was even less likely to have anything to do with drug trafficking, an activity that he correctly considered to be just as despicable as pimping.

The gangsters of the sixties with whom Mesrine was acquainted usually assured their basic income by pimping one or more girls (although they did not invent the slot machines and drug trafficking had not yet acquired the importance it has now). The rest of their income was provided by thefts, robberies and trafficking, and constituted a supplement of resources thanks to which they

could, once they had amassed enough loot, open up a front business and open a restaurant or a nightclub. Mesrine never stooped to become a pimp, which led him at various times, as in 1973, to carry out more attacks and thus to take more risks.

Mesrine never ceased to distance himself from the world of the gangsters. For their part, they did not at all like either his celebrity persona or his scandalous declarations. Business requires discretion, and "Public Enemy No. 1" did not have the mindset of a businessman, which is what all gangsters end up becoming if they do not fall by the wayside. In one of his last interviews, in late 1978, he declared loud and clear that the criminal underworld can go to hell and that all its fake codes of honor are a pile of shit.

Mesrine maintained close relations of complicity with various women: with Jeanne Schneider, with whom he went to Canada and kidnapped Deslauriers; with Jocelyn Deraiche, whom he knew in Canada and who returned to France with him, and finally with Sylvia Jeanjacquot, whom he met during his last period as a fugitive. His Canadian gang, of which Jeanne Schneider was a member, showed that Mesrine was not shackled by the codes of the criminal underworld, where women were only admitted as prostitutes, and never of course as comrades of the gang. With his successive girlfriends, who accompanied him during his periods as a fugitive, he never had any children. On the other hand, he had difficult relations with the mother of his children, his second wife, María de la Soledad, who agreed to passively wait for him at home. He did not try to conceal this fact, and in his book he describes a painful scene after which she decided to finally leave him. Those women who shared his fate as an outlaw, however, were to know life in prison. Jeanne Schneider spent six years in prison in Canada and France, Jocelyn Deraiche spent two years in jail in France and several months in Canada, and finally, Sylvia Jeanjacquot, who would also be mutilated by the assassins of the anti-organized crime brigade, was held in preventive detention for two years before she was released without any charges being pressed against her: a way of settling accounts with a person who had committed no other crime than to love an outlaw.

It has often been said that the Algerian War was the event that made Mesrine stray from the "path of righteousness". It appears that he had already tried to stray from it even before, if we are to believe his friends from his adolescence, particularly one of them, filmed by Palud and Millet in 1984, who recounted the many times he played truant from school so he could go and watch gangster movies. When he performed his military duty—after having gone through his first divorce—they sent him to Algeria, along with tens of thousands of other youths of his generation. The war provided him with an opportunity to become proficient in the use of arms and accustomed him to danger. He was no stranger to firefights, and it may be that he took pleasure in the baroud.<sup>8</sup>

The war also left its mark on him in another way. We must not forget that in that war the officers taught the young conscripts, recently emerging from adolescence, to torture, and awakened in them the unwholesome pleasure of dehumanizing the enemy. Mesrine was also the product of this particularly repugnant colonial war, and in his book he describes the cruelties he inflicted many years later on one or another pimp or some gangsters who tried to rob him, and concluded with the tortures that he inflicted on Tillier. On these occasions Mesrine displayed a twisted cruelty and the fact that he exercised it against despicable individuals does not change anything in this respect.

If Mesrine seems to have been a good soldier, since he was decorated for bravery at the end of his military service, his return to civilian life did not transform him into a good citizen, but into a marginal, and the former soldier was transformed into a real fighter. It is noteworthy that Mesrine participated in the last war in which the French state resorted to conscript soldiers; from then on the various governments of France only entrusted their dirty work to volunteers, and even abolished compulsory military service. In France, as in all of western Europe, war disappeared from everyday experience and only appeared in the form of an image, in televised news reports and video games. The figure of the citizen-soldier was erased; that form of domestication has become superfluous, and the example of Mesrine shows above all that it did not always work, since the good soldier of yesterday, once he left the military framework, he could become a dangerous rebel. It is also necessary to see in the violence with which Mesrine transfixed his time an energetic antidote for the boredom and the banality of the petty bourgeois environment from which he came, and in which he could not find a place after he returned from the war.

Mesrine's taste for burning money is similar to his taste for action. This was undoubtedly the only real drug to which Mesrine yielded, all the more easily since he did not know physical fear. The Great Jacques enjoyed going on his bank robbery missions, and according to the testimonies of those with whom he formed his gangs, he never lost his cold blooded determination; the way he escaped so many firefights confirms this. He bore within himself something that undoubtedly transcended fear: the fierce battle for recognition.

Mesrine's career as a bank robber must be situated in the context of his times: the seventies witnessed the multiplication throughout France of bank branch offices at a time when surveillance technologies were not yet widely available. During the following decade cameras, armored security cameras and metal detectors were installed in banks. There was so much cash available! Michel Ardouin, with whom Mesrine collaborated in 1973, said: "Mesrine was a very good bank robber, with an American-style view" (Maybe this is a legacy of his experience on the other side of the Atlantic?). The bank robberies he committed were rapid operations, undertaken by small teams (generally two in the bank and one in the getaway car), often repeated on the same day. He never carried out operations of the type for which the "wig gang"<sup>9</sup> became famous, or attacks on Brinks armored trucks making deliveries of cash, often organized by gangsters to whom they sold information, and who would then recruit, equip and pay those responsible for carrying out the assault; afterwards they would launder the stolen banknotes. It

was another time, with another way of doing things: act quickly and efficiently, repeatedly, and with absolute independence. All that was needed was to case the bank offices and go into action. After his escape in 1978, Mesrine changed his modus operandi: he assaulted a casino (the one in Deauville), he robbed a bank in Raincy by tracking down the director of the branch office directly to his home, he robbed a few supermarkets and, finally, he carried out his greatest coup in terms of proceeds, the kidnapping of Henri Lelièvre, a businessman who had gotten rich from real estate speculation and management.

Mesrine sometimes acted hastily, as was demonstrated when he took hostages in the house of the judge Petit. But he triumphed where others were defeated: for example, in the delivery of the ransom money for the millionaire Lelièvre, whereas the year before the kidnapers of Baron Empain were caught at this crucial juncture. The astute Mesrine foresaw the trap after a first attempt to deliver the money and riddled an unmarked police car with bullets. The second attempt proceeded according to plan.

Dignity is easily transformed into arrogance when one lacks the capacity to view oneself objectively, and Mesrine paid dearly for this shortcoming in 1973. Especially when they arrested him the second time, because he had trusted an inexperienced member of his gang and refused to admit that he was wrong: the inexperienced member in question, recruited as a getaway driver for a robbery, was arrested and informed on Mesrine and his accomplices. His taste for action sometimes prevailed over his calculations: the action against the judge Petit was carried out with the participation of some inexperienced youths, a neighbor whom he had gradually begun to trust and a friend of his.<sup>10</sup> The operation was botched, the cops appeared, a firefight took place and only Mesrine was able to escape. One of the youths panicked, they arrested him and, after interrogation, the cops were sent to the hideout of Mesrine, who, already burned by his misadventure in the fall of 1973, had the good sense to expect their arrival and evacuated the house.

It never ceases to be amazing that he committed himself to an action as risky as taking a judge hostage with a gang of "incompetents" like Jean Luc Coupé and Christian Kopf: but it is also true that no one else wanted to take this risk, not even François Besse ("He wanted to take revenge, and I did not," as Besse would say later). And the Great Jacques was consumed by the need to denounce that monstrous machine for grinding prisoners known as the MAS; by acting in this manner, he demonstrated his loyalty to those who were still inside: Taleb Hadjadj, Roger Knobelspiess, Alain Bendjelloul, Philippe Roubat, Daniel Debrille...

If he sometimes made mistakes in choosing his accomplices, he usually chose them well: Jean-Paul Mercier, with whom he escaped from the Special Corrections Unit and returned to assault the prison; Michel Schayewski, with whom he carried out some successful robberies of supermarkets and later the kidnapping of Lelièvre. Not to mention François Besse, the master escape artist with whom he successfully escaped from a police dragnet in the countryside of Normandy after the robbery of the Deauville casino, or Charlie Bauer, a comrade of his from the MAS who was later accused of having accompanied him when he went to administer punishment to the police-journalist of Minute, Jacques Tillier. Mesrine almost always acted as a member of a two-man team.

The duo represented a basic form of complicity, that of equals. Mesrine was a soldier once in his life, he had no inclination to be one again and although during the course of an interview conducted in 1978 he referred to the RAF and the Red Brigades, it is doubtful that an individual like him could have accommodated himself to the militarist mode of operations of those organizations. And we must add that Mesrine, far from harboring any vanguardist pretensions, only ever spoke in his own name; this also explains the sympathy that he still enjoys more than thirty years after his death, when the Leninist phraseology of both groups has been consigned to the garbage can of history.

We must recall, finally, that Mesrine was the only one of all those who suffered the regime of the MAS who, once on the outside, engaged in an activity directed at denouncing the existence of this prison within the prison (the seizure of hostages at the home of judge Petit, although unsuccessful, nonetheless called attention to this issue). The struggle against the MAS was an extension of the struggle he had already waged in Canada: there, Mesrine managed to get the Special Corrections Unit of Saint-Vincent closed down in 1972. He contrived to record an audio tape, which he sent to several radio stations, in which he denounced that organized mechanism for making prisoners commit suicide or succumb to insanity, those cells, some of which were veritable "gas chamber

taken from here

Foto: Bernhard Weber

[< PREVIOUS](#) [NEXT >](#)

---

## META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG



TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER